

Nature Meets History at IU's Research and Teaching Preserve



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Things get lost, left behind, or intentionally disposed of in convenient places like pits, privies, wells, abandoned buildings, ravines, sinkholes, and even abandoned railroad corridors. Years later, these places can become archaeological sites. Through the first half of the 20th century and into the 1970s, a railroad corridor, abandoned in 1905 on the north side of Bloomington, provided a popular dumpsite for households and businesses. Glassware, ceramics, metal, bottles, and other items, dumped into the unused railroad bed for over half a century, created an archaeological midden. In 2018, the dumpsite was recorded as archaeological site 12Mo1617. Located on property currently owned by Indiana University as part of its Research and Teaching Preserve (IU RTP), the site was recorded during a DHPA Historic Preservation grant-funded survey of some IU RTP properties – a first step in identifying and managing these cultural resources introducing them to environmental sciences.

The IU RTP currently has eight properties spanning three counties, totaling nearly 1,600 acres of land. The IU RTP field lab's purpose is to enhance research and teaching in the environmental sciences on the IU campus. In addition to natural resources, the properties include a variety of cultural resources such as archaeological sites and historic infrastructure. This infrastructure includes a fire tower, dam, house foundations, dumpsites, coal piles, wells, and cisterns. Knowledge about the many different cultural sites on the properties highlights concerns not only about preservation and cultural heritage, but also an awareness of how previous human interactions could impact environmental research data, especially historic dumpsites where various metals, chemicals, disturbance, and debris could have significant impacts on data outcomes.

In late December 2021, Michael Chitwood, property manager for the IU RTP, notified archaeologists at IU about an "issue". He had just come across several bags of glass, metal and ceramic items that had been collected from site 12Mo1617. Whether collected by a good Samaritan cleaning up the area or by someone in search of bottles and other finds, he needed to figure out what to do with the nearly 40 bags of "artifacts" from the dump, anonymously collected



and left on the property. While we may never know who was responsible for the actions leading to the bagged artifacts, they provided an opportunity to learn about Bloomington's past, archaeology, garbage, and historic preservation.

As it turned out, the timing was perfect. April Sievert, then senior lecturer with the IU Department of Anthropology, was teaching archaeological curation in the upcoming spring semester. With much effort, strong backs, and a few wheelbarrows, Michael and crew carted all the bags up and out of the ravine, set up a clever artifact washing station using recycled materials. Michael also provided the laboratory space needed for students to sort and identify the artifacts. The stage was set for a cooperative endeavor in archaeology, history, and environmental sciences learning!

Archaeological curation students got a chance to learn first-hand about the process, methods, and purpose for collecting and curating archaeological objects, including how to sample and make decisions about what might be kept. These objects formed a teaching collection for the IU RTP field lab. Students also learned about 20th century material culture, Bloomington history, and food, including consumption of products like ketchup, milk, soda pop, and alcohol by sorting through thousands of container fragments. The materials collected included mostly glass fragments from bottles and jars. With fifteen students, each armed with a portable search engine in their cell phones, it did not take long to discover that bottles and jars carry signs of their manufacture and use. For example, bottle bases inscribed with the letters H-257 held Heinz® ketchup. Students also got to piece together ceramic dinnerware, the bulk of which came from institutional or restaurant china, including some pieces from Indiana University.

Dumpsites like 12Mo1617 pose hazards to hikers and the environment while also attracting artifact collectors. As historic properties, they have research value and can impact other kinds of environmental sciences research. Not only was this "issue" a teachable moment, but it provided an opportunity to revisit other historic archaeological sites on IU RTP properties that Chitwood manages in Monroe and Brown counties, and to bring historic and archaeological resources into the environmental science mission of the IU RTP field lab.

The Research and Teaching Preserve was established in 2001 with the mission to provide natural field settings that complement existing facilities and infrastructure at Indiana University. The RTP is constantly trying to expand collaborations across the IU curriculum and research endeavors that could benefit from their field sites. The benefit of knowing the land and its history has been crucial in expanding these efforts and to improve the quality of research and teaching currently provided to the community. The human impacts on the environment cannot be ignored and need to be considered from numerous vantage points, whether as an ecologist, land manager, or artist. Information on forest structure, soil chemistry, plant communities, and topography expands when human-land impacts are considered. Chitwood hopes to continue efforts to log surface findings at IU RTP properties for



preservation efforts and to expand locations for researchers in archeology and cultural history programs. While collaborations focusing on ecological topics, human impacts, and cultural preservation has been low, Chitwood hopes to continue to educate the research community and public about the importance of preserving historic and cultural aspects of landscapes and to consider the ways in which human actions past, present, and future impact natural and cultural resources and research outcomes.

In Indiana it is illegal to collect artifacts even from the surface of sites located on federal and state property. A permit is required to conduct field investigations on state property (IC 14-21-1-16). *For more information on dumps, archaeology and historic preservation, Indiana archaeology law, and the IU RTP see:*

Indiana DNR, Division of Historic Preservation & Archaeology Website:

<https://www.in.gov/dnr/historic-preservation/>

Indiana Archaeology Law:

https://www.in.gov/dnr/historic-preservation/files/hp_archaeolaw.pdf

Indiana University Research and Teaching Preserve Website:

<https://preserve.indiana.edu/about/index.html#nav-main>

“Trash Pits and Site Formation,” *Project Archaeology*:

<https://projectarchaeology.org/2016/08/08/trash-pits-and-site-formation/>

“Garbology: It is More Than Just Trash and How to Incorporate it into your Social Studies Class,” *The Musings of a History Gal*:

<https://www.musingsofahistorygal.com/2015/04/garbology-it-is-more-than-just-trash.html#>

“Seeking the Truth in Refuse,” *New York Times*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/13/nyregion/seeking-the-truth-in-refuse.html>

“Trash or Treasure? Sifting Through Ancient Rubbish for Archaeological Gold,” *CNN*:

<https://www.cnn.com/2011/10/04/world/europe/archaeology-ancient-trash/index.html>

“Midden: An Archaeological Garbage Dump,” *ThoughtCo*:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/midden-an-archaeological-garbage-dump-171806>

“Someone Else’s Trash,” *LibreTexts Social Sciences*:

[https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Anthropology/Archeology/Digging_into_Archaeology%3A_A_Brief_OER_Introduction_to_Archaeology_with_Activities_\(Paskey_and_Cisneros\)/11%3A_Social_Archaeology/11.05%3A_Activity_4_-_Someone_Else's_Trash](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Anthropology/Archeology/Digging_into_Archaeology%3A_A_Brief_OER_Introduction_to_Archaeology_with_Activities_(Paskey_and_Cisneros)/11%3A_Social_Archaeology/11.05%3A_Activity_4_-_Someone_Else's_Trash)

“What a Waste: CAP’s Take on MSU Bathroom Garbology,” *MSU Campus Archaeology Program*,

<https://campusarch.msu.edu/?p=9125>